FRANK FRAZETTA'S

DARK KINGDOM™

image

$3.99 US

PART 3

COVER A

COPYRIGHT©FRANK FRAZETTA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

IMAGE COMICS AND FRAZETTA COMICS
PRESENT

FRANK FRAZETTA'S

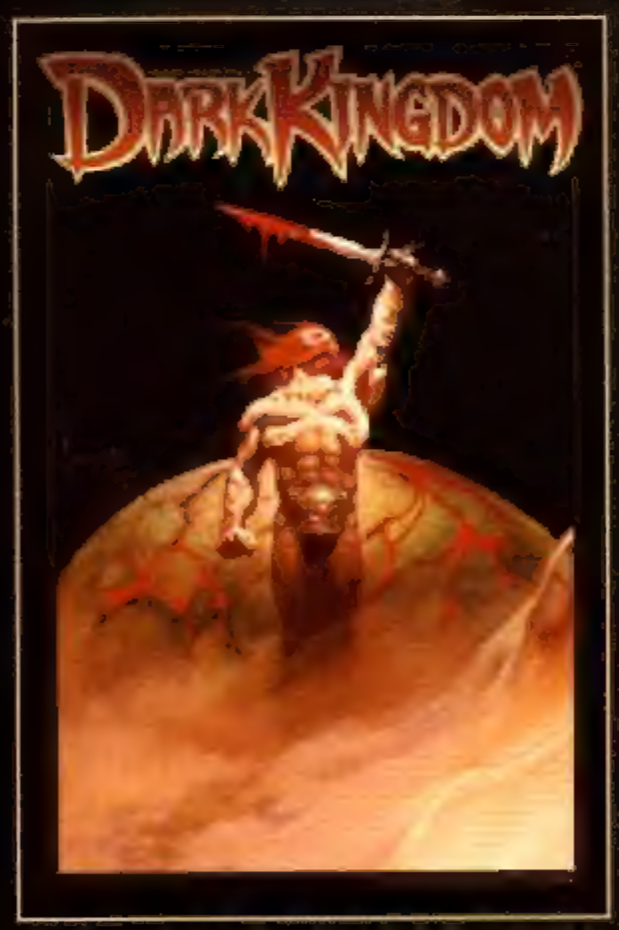
DARK KINGDOM

PART 3

STORY
MARK KIDWELL

PEN & INKS
TIM VIGIL

COLOR/LETTERING/DESIGN
JAY FOTOS



COVER A FRANK FRAZETTA

COVER B TIM VILGIL/ JAY FOTOS

COVER C NAT JONES

IMAGE COMICS, INC.

ROBERT KIRKMAN - CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER
ERIK LARSEN - CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER
TODD MCFARLANE - PRESIDENT
MARC SILVESTRI - CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
JIM VALENTINO - VICE-PRESIDENT

ERICSTEPHENSON - PUBLISHER
JOE KEATINGE - PR & MARKETING COORDINATOR
BRANWYN BIGGLESTONE - ACCOUNTS MANAGER
SARAH DELAINE - ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT
TYLER SHAINLINE - PRODUCTION MANAGER
DREW GILL - ART DIRECTOR
JONATHAN CHAN - PRODUCTION ARTIST
MONICA HOWARD - PRODUCTION ARTIST
VINCENT KUKUA - PRODUCTION ARTIST

WWW.IMAGECOMICS.COM

FRANK FRAZETTA'S DARK KINGDOM 3. DECEMBER 2009. PUBLISHED BY IMAGE COMICS, INC., OFFICE OF PUBLICATION: 2134 ALLSTON WAY, SECOND FLOOR, BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA 94704. FRANK FRAZETTA COVER A ART ™ AND © 2009 BY FRANK FRAZETTA. USED WITH PERMISSION. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. ALL ARTWORK, LOGO AND STORY CONTENT IS © 2009 JAY FOTOS, MARK KIDWELL AND NAT JONES, UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED. IMAGE COMICS® AND ITS LOGOS ARE REGISTERED TRADEMARKS OF IMAGE COMICS, INC. NO PART OF THIS PUBLICATION MAY BE REPRODUCED OR TRANSMITTED, IN ANY FORM OR BY ANY MEANS (EXCEPT FOR SHORT EXCERPTS FOR REVIEW PURPOSES) WITHOUT THE EXPRESS WRITTEN PERMISSION OF IMAGE COMICS, INC., JAY FOTOS, MARK KIDWELL AND NAT JONES. ALL NAMES, CHARACTERS, EVENTS AND LOCALES IN THIS PUBLICATION ARE ENTIRELY FICTIONAL. ANY RESEMBLANCE TO ACTUAL PERSONS (LIVING OR DEAD), EVENTS OR PLACES, WITHOUT SATIRIC INTENT, IS COINCIDENTAL. PRINTED BY WORLD COLOR PRESS, INC., ST-ROMUALD, QC, CANADA. 12/16/09.

INTERNATIONAL RIGHTS REPRESENTATIVE: CHRISTINE JENSEN (CHRISTINE@FOLIOSTUDIO.COM)

WWW.MYSPACE.COM/FRAZETTACOMICS
WWW.FRANKFRAZETTA.COM

COPYRIGHT© FRANK FRAZETTA. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

CHAPTER 3: ISLE OF BLOOD AND IRON

"I'VE HAD MY SUPPER, GRANDFATHER GHURRD! MY CHORES ARE DONE AND MOTHER SAID I..." Finn choked off the remainder of his excited declaration as he pushed past the thick wooden door into the interior of his grandfather's hut and stared, startled at the sight of the hooded crone next to Ghurrd at the hearth.

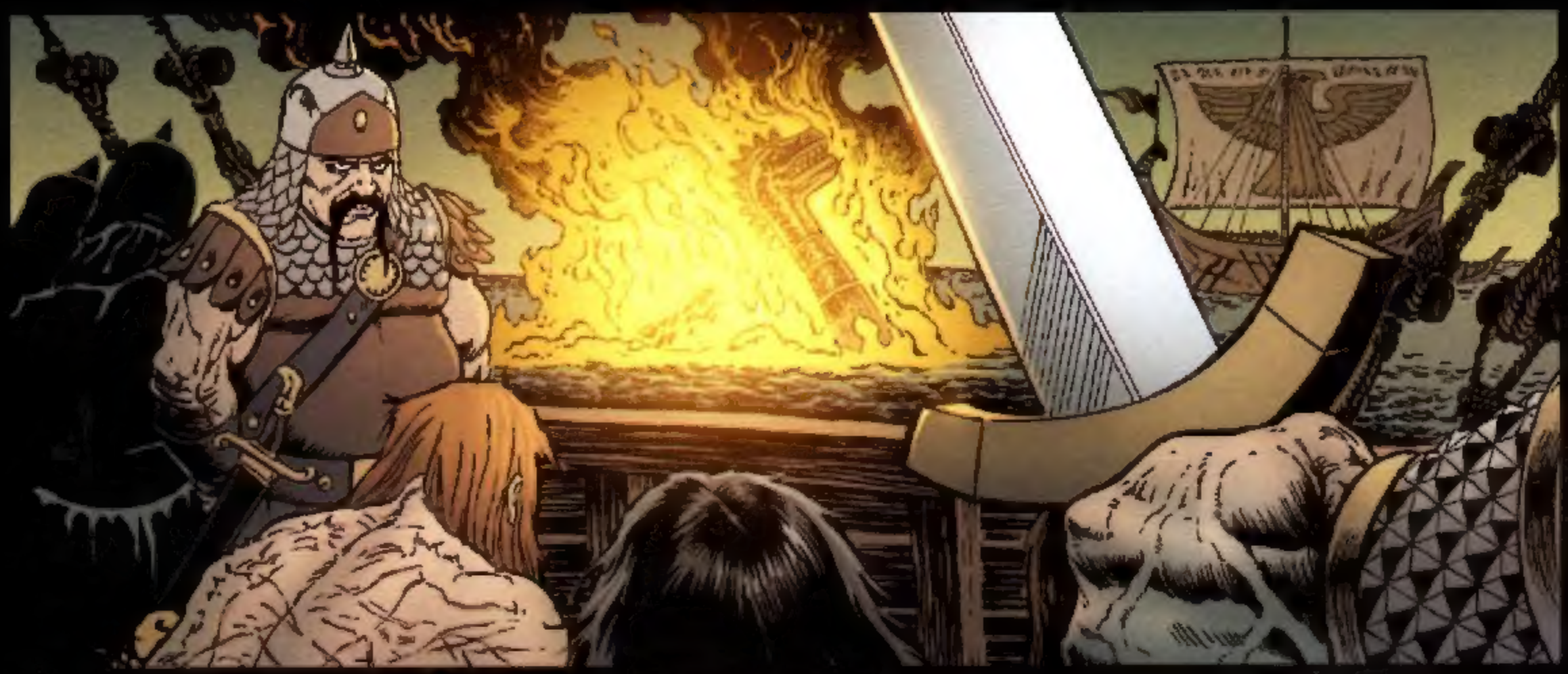
"THIS IS VEDDRA," the old man said, lips moving around the pipe stem between his teeth. "SHE'S AN ELDER OF THE CLAN, FROM THE MOUNTAINS ABOVE THE HIGH PLAINS. SHE HAS A PART OF THE SAGA OF MORDEN THAT I DON'T. AND HAVE NO WORRY...SHE STOPPED EATING LITTLE BOYS LONG AGO."

"SINCE MY TEETH LEFT ME," Veddra croaked, raising her head and flashing a toothless, proving grin.

"NOW CLOSE THAT DOOR AND LEAVE THE THAW'S CHILL OUTSIDE," Ghurrd said, lowering his brow and grinning himself. "AND WE'LL HEAR MORE OF THE CRIMSON REAVER."

"THE ISLE OF THORNS?" Finn chirped anxiously, closing the door.

"SOON ENOUGH. BUT FIRST, WE'LL BEGIN WITH SOMETHING ELSE. SOMETHING HAPPENING AT THE SAME MOMENT, OUT ON THE SEA."



A rare sight rode the icy white caps of the Brumal that morning as long, curling tendrils of black smoke rose to the skies from the burning deck of a Vikavian dragon-prow. The sinking vessel rose and dipped with the swells next to a fat Man-O-War that sat like a gloating, gorged predator. Further away, under full sail and cleaving the waves southward, a second warship made for home shores. Both foreign vessels flew the golden falcon standard of ***K'Thaya***, home to emperors, mysticism and people of yellow skin.

Aboard the anchored K'Thayan ship, a stout man armored in a captain's battle dress stood with his hands behind his back amidships, smiling wickedly and staring down at the chained man at his feet.

"I AM CAPTAIN CHUNN. AND YOU ARE THE LEADER OF THIS PACK OF THIEVING WOLVES, EH?" he asked with a leering grin. The fat K'Thayan bent at his plump waist, leaning closer to stare into the pain-wracked eyes of the bleeding man on the deck before him. The man remained silent save for deep, wracking breaths as he rested on his knees, head down, face hidden between blood-stained golden braids. His back, bared and exposed to the rising sun, showed the red, wet ruin of the lash. "WILL YOU NOT SPEAK AND SPARE YOURSELF THE RENEWED KISS OF THE BRAIDS?"

"I...WILL SPEAK," the suffering Vikavian panted, raising his head to stare at the piggish captain. He squinted his eyes at the glare of the sun and his pupils darted left to right, taking in the sight of his tormentor and the dark figure next to him on the deck. The dark man was taller, pale and painfully thin. His pointed head was clean-shaven and the features of his face were craggy, shadowed and sharp. Atop his head were black tattoos depicting tangled, thorny vines. "IF ONLY TO TELL YOU TO GO TO HELL!"

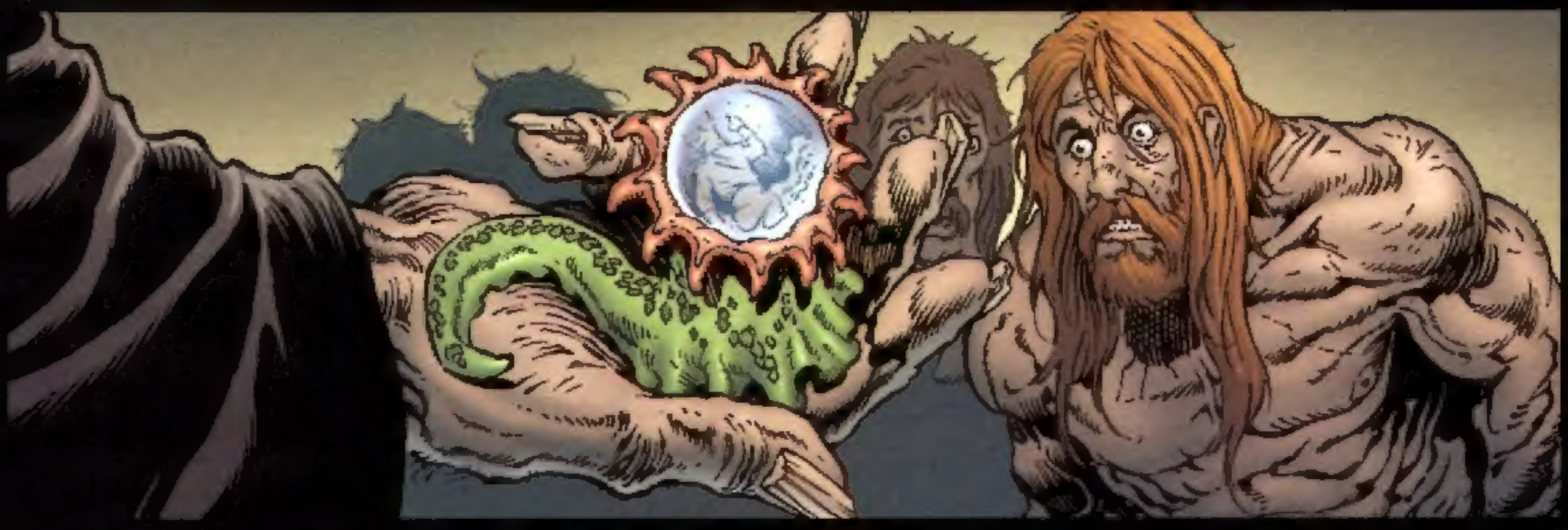
"AH, I SEE THE SEA-WOLF STILL HAS HIS FANGS!" Chunn shouted, grinning wider. "TO HELL IS IT? YES, I EXPECT SO BARBARIAN...IN TIME. BUT FOR NOW, IT IS YOU WHO ARE WRITHING IN HELL ON MY DECK! WHAT SAY YOU TO THAT, JALLAK?"

"H-HOW...?"

"YOUR NAME? HA! A SIMPLE MATTER, NORTHRON! THAT INFORMATION, ALONG WITH YOUR WHEREABOUTS AND THE CURRENT LOCATION OF THE TRUE OBJECT OF MY QUEST, HAVE BEEN PROVIDED BY MY FRIEND HERE," the captain chuckled, raising a hand toward the grim, robed figure next to him. The bald man stepped forward, raising a thin, white hand from his black robes and spreading his fingers to reveal the squirming, dripping form of a large sea slug. The slug curled and flexed on the sorcerer's palm, opening its single, cyclopean eye to reveal a blank, curved surface. On the surface of the creature's eye, an image began to form, rising from the milky depths. "ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE KA-VARYSS, HIGH PRIEST AND CONJURER OF THE CULT OF THE IRON ROSE!"

The image in the slug's eye began to clear, and Jallak's fevered stare was rewarded with the image of a long beach before a dark, swaying jungle. On the beach, in the shadows of an iron monster from some lost briny Hell, lay the still form of his closest lifelong friend.

"RED MORDEN," he whispered, the words sounding in his ears like the thunder of doom.



"THE CULT OF THE IRON ROSE!? WHO ARE THEY?" Finn asked, rising to his knees on the bearskin in his excitement. "AND HOW DID THE K'THAYANS DEFEAT JALLAK AND HIS WHOLE CREW?"

"EASY BOY," Ghurrd replied, signaling for Finn to calm down. "I SAID IT TOOK THE YELLOW-SKINS TWO SHIPS TO BEST JALLAK AND CREW DID I NOT? AS FOR KA-VARYSS, THIS WIZARD... HE WAS INDEED A MEMBER OF THE CULT OF THE IRON ROSE, A VILE GATHERING OF SPELL-WEAVERS AND WORSHIPPERS OF DARK ENERGIES THAT MURMUR AND CHANT TO THIS DAY IN THEIR BLACK CHURCHES ACROSS AGADAH. THE K'THAYANS, IT SEEMS, HAD LOST TOO MANY SHIPS TO OUR FIERCE RAIDERS AND FIGURING ON SCATTERING THE CLANS BY TAKING OUR GREATEST WARRIOR'S HEAD, THEIR EMPEROR HAD LOWERED HIMSELF TO BARTERING WITH DEVILS. HE WANTED MORDEN BADLY."

"AND THE SEA-SLUG?" Finn asked. "WHERE DID A MAN FROM THE CITIES GET SUCH MAGICK?"

"I'D HAVE THOUGHT YOU'D PUT THAT ONE TOGETHER ON YOUR OWN, BOY," Ghurrd huffed, breathing smoke. "THE SLUG WAS A GIFT, FROM CARCERA!"

"THAT FILTHY SEA-WITCH!" Veddra exclaimed, making mystic symbols in the air over her chest. "ONE OF MANY. DARKEST OF ALL."

"WHY WOULD CARCERA HELP THE K'THAYANS?" Finn asked, eyes rolling in confusion.

"NOT THE K'THAYANS, SON," Ghurrd answered. "THOSE FOOLS MERELY PROVIDED TRANSPORTATION. CARCERA'S GIFT WAS INTENDED FOR THE WIZARD, TO HELP HIM FOLLOW MORDEN."

"BUT THE SEA-WITCH SENT RED MORDEN ON HIS QUEST. TO RETRIEVE..."

"THE TALISMAN OF POWER," Ghurrd interrupted. "YES, SHE DID. HER GOAL WAS TO SEND MORDEN TO THE ISLE OF THORNS TO SNATCH THE TALISMAN FROM THE HANDS OF HE WHO STOLE IT."

"STOLE IT? WHO STOLE IT?"

"PATIENCE, FINN," Ghurrd smiled, leaning back. "FOR NOW, YOU NEED KNOW ONLY THIS. THE IRON ROSE CULT HAD BEEN POWERLESS FOR SOME DECADES. OH, THEY COULD STILL CONJURE THE SMALLER SPELLS AND KEEP CURIOUS EYES FROM THEIR SANCTUARIES WITH PARLOR TRICKS AND CURSES, BUT THEIR TRUE POWER, THE KIND THAT CAN RAISE DEMONS AND SMITE CITIES...HAD BEEN STOLEN BY ONE OF THEIR OWN. THIS POWER WAS CONTAINED WITHIN THE TALISMAN MORDEN SOUGHT TO RAISE HIS WIFE FROM THE DEAD. CARCERA SOUGHT IT AS WELL, NOT FOR HERSELF, BUT TO RETURN IT TO THE CULT, SO THOSE MADMEN WOULD USE IT AGAIN, RELEASING MORE OF ITS POWER INTO THE WORLD, THAT SHE MIGHT FEAST UPON IT."

"SO, WITH THE SORCERER SEEKING THE TALISMAN, WHY SEND RED MORDEN?" Finn asked.

"AH, THERE'S THE GENIUS OF THE WITCH'S PLAN," Ghurrd grinned, poking the air with his pipe again. "YOU SEE, HER POWERS, THOUGH VAST, CAME FROM THE SEA. ON LAND, SHE WAS WEAKER. AND THE WIZARD WHO STOLE THE IRON ROSE HAD GONE TO GROUND YEARS EARLIER, HIDING AND BUILDING HIS POWER. CARCERA WANTED NO PART OF A DUEL WITH HIM. SHE KNEW OF MORDEN'S VICTORY OVER THE DRAGON-BEAST AND WAGERED THAT HIS AXE, MARRIED WITH THE PASSION OF HIS QUEST TO BREATHE LIFE INTO HIS DEAD WIFE, WOULD WIN OUT."

"THIS IRON ROSE," Finn spoke aloud, more to himself than to Ghurrd or Veddra. "THE TALISMAN...IT WAS A FLOWER?"

"I'VE LET MY LIPS SLIP UP, HAVE I?" Ghurrd said, shaking his bald head and leaning over to tap ash from the bowl of his pipe. "SO BE IT. YES, FINN...THE TALISMAN FULL OF SO MUCH POWER AND MAGICK THAT ALL THE CONJURERS OF THE WORLD SOUGHT IT AND ENVIED ITS SECRETS, WAS A SINGLE ROSE WITH PETALS OF SILKEN BLACK."

Morden woke to a world of aching pain and sunlit warmth, raising his face from the hot sand and squinting hard against the late morning glare. He pushed with his arms, wincing not only from the stiffness in his muscles, but from stinging sunburn on his shoulders and back. He shook his head as he rose, hurling sharp grains of glassy sand from his fiery beard and squeezing his eyes shut as his mind sought equilibrium. When he opened them again, he saw the shadow. Raising his head to see what cast the arm of darkness across the beach, he fell to his knees once more, eyes wide now and mouth open in shock.

The leering monster clutching twin tridents and kneeling on a tangle of iron thorns glared back at Morden over a frozen mass of black tentacles. It sat silent, unmoving, with its fearsome beak half open in an endless silent shriek. Morden fell back, aghast at the evil sight, hands raking the sand to either side, searching for his axe. He struggled backward like a crab, scraping his tender back on the sand as his dry throat sought fruitlessly to scream. He slid further, eyes locked on the demon, straining for any sign of attack, until his questing fingers touched the heated surface of burnished metal.

Morden flinched at the heat in his fingertips, spinning his head toward the source of the sensation. Before him lay his winged helm, shining and glowing brass-gold in the sunshine. He blinked, not trusting his eyes and looked again as if expecting some sort of illusion. The helmet was still there and next to it lay his battle-axe. Morden whipped his head back toward the massive creature further down the beach, panicked at the thought that unwatched, the beast would be upon him. The thing hadn't moved. It stood stock-still, brooding over the empty sand with its frozen, devil's gaze. Morden quickly donned the helm and grabbed his axe. Armed an armored now, he rose from the sand and stared at the horrid vision once more.

"IRON," he rasped dryly, staring at the frozen monster. "IRON OR I'M A K'THAYAN."

All around, wedged into the dunes or bobbing in the surf, he could see bits of shattered wood and torn canvas. Several yards further down the beach, the cracked rudder of his ruined boat stood parting the surf. He shook his head, recalling Carcera's waterspout and the frantic, whirlwind journey that had delivered him to this desolate shore. He remembered the roar of the water, the visions in the walls of the funnel and the high, sharp laughter of the sorceress as...Morden raised his head suddenly, memories shattered and gone as his eyes raced over the sand between he and the wrecked stern.

"NYROR'S BEARD!" He cursed, arms going slack at his sides. "HOW...?"

Mere yards from where Morden stood, close to the spot where he'd just claimed his helm and weapon, lay a heap of fresh fruit and a bulging, sweating water skin. With a yell of disbelief still choking in his razored throat, he bolted forward, casting about from side to side for some glimpse of whomever had delivered the provisions. He found nothing. Only the impossible vision of an icy ocean beyond the fang-like reefs on one side and the swaying green wall of the jungle on the other met his searching eyes. Reaching the pile of fruit, he fell to his knees, dropping his axe in an instant and pulling the bone cork from the water skin. Without hesitation, he raised it and locked his lips around the spout; gulping hungrily at the fresh, cool water. He drank deep, swallowing and spilling in equal measure until caution bade him stop, lest he burst his stomach with sheer liquid volume. Wiping at his dripping chin, he set the water skin aside and dove at the pile of fruit.

Mindless in his hunger and thirst, Morden feasted on the beach, completely unaware of the pair of narrowed blue eyes that watched him intensely from the wood line.

It wasn't until he'd devoured most of the fruit that he noticed the footprints. The spoor was shallow, indicating someone small in stature with narrow feet and sandaled heels. They led away from the shore in a straight line, traveling over the rise of the dunes to disappear into the shadowy wall of jungle at the island's center.

Morden raised a hand to shield his brow and followed the trail of footprints with his eyes. Seeing them enter the dense tree line, he scanned as much of it as he could, watching for the telltale movement of a frond or leaf that didn't match the direction of the breeze. Nothing stirred or disturbed the shadows. Morden lowered his hand and wrapped the battle-axe's leather thong around his wrist. Gripping the pommel, he tossed the half empty water skin over his shoulder and followed the footprints to the tree line.

Aboard the K'Thayan Man-O-War, Jallak lay slumped in a bleeding, aching pile amongst the moaning, semi-conscious forms of his fellow Vikavians. His back had blackened and yellowed in the sun, leaking thick pus as fast as the dark blood that stained the deck before him. The ship lurched and pitched under him, bringing his stomach into his throat and adding nausea to agony. The weight of the iron shackles drug his arms down and loosened them in tortured sockets. Manacles chafed at his wrists and ankles and fat black flies sought to feast on his wounds and eyes.

These and a thousand other tortures plagued the wounded raider, making every breath an agony and threatening to send him hurtling into a void of black unconsciousness at any second. But all of this paled beside the horror before him as he stared at the backs of Chunn and the wizard. He watched, swallowing bile again, his stomach lurching with a spasm of pure, frozen horror as the tattooed vines on the thin flesh covering the sorcerer's skull writhed and danced, twisting themselves into a myriad of evil, impossible patterns.

Deep in the jungle, Morden stood at the moss-covered edge of a blunt escarpment, staring down a steep, rocky slope toward the green expanse of a jungle clearing below. He pushed aside a draping wall of dangling creepers to gain a better view, casting his gaze about and taking in the features of the landscape. He grunted, confused and angry at the loss of the trail and looked down again at the final soft footprint pressed into the spongy green growth at this feet. He had followed the trail easily from the beach, spotting broken twigs and vines, dislodged creepers and always, always...the clear prints of a pair of soft, sandaled feet leading forward. Then, suddenly, at the cliff's edge, the footprints had disappeared. It was as if whomever he trailed had taken wing and...

"HSSST! DINNA GAH!" The voice came from above and behind Morden, accompanied by the cold edge of a stone knife at his throat. Morden cursed himself silently for having been such a fool, glaring at the wall of creeper vines so close by, so obvious. Angry but helpless, he raised his arms in surrender.

"YOU HAVE ME, DAMN YOU!" He hissed, scowling from beneath his helm.

"HSSST!" The voice came again, hushed and cautionary. The blade left Morden's throat and he spun, axe in hand. The patch of mossy ground and the wall of creepers behind him were empty. Frustrated anew, he spun back toward the cliff edge, stopping himself from shouting in surprise only by sheer force of will. "HSSST!"

"DINNA GAH!" The girl whispered again, trying desperately to communicate with Morden by raising a finger to her lips. Morden stood gaping at her, axe lowered.

"A WOMAN..." He whispered aloud, his voice low and filled with surprise as well as further embarrassment at having been caught unaware by a female. The girl hung there in front of the stunned Reaver, dangling from strong handholds, swaying nimbly with the natural movement of the vines. She was beautiful, with raven dark hair and clear blue eyes that shone like gemstones. Her lithe figure gleamed with sweat, the moisture trickling in tiny rivers from her neck to her hips, impeded in its course only by three furred triangles that made up the scant covering she wore. Her only other visible possessions were the soft sandals strapped to her feet, the bone knife and a slender bow and quiver riding her back. "BY THE GODS...!"

"HSSST!" The warning to be silent came a final time and then the girl launched herself into space. She flew silently out and over the edge of the escarpment, her shadow racing over the moss, down the incline and finally across the green stretch of cleared jungle below. Morden caught his breath, frantic at the thought of the beautiful girl throwing her life away senselessly. Seconds later, he exhaled again, watching her flight end as she easily grasped another cluster of creepers and slid quickly and gracefully to the ground below. Morden moved closer, kneeling at the escarpment's edge and pushing the vines aside again to peer down at the mysterious girl.

"VILL-NA!" She screamed, adopting a fierce stance before a dark tangle of growth at the clearing's edge. As she shouted, she tucked the stone blade into the thong at her waist and pulled the bow from her back. Sliding a single arrow from its quiver, she repeated her cry. "VILL-NA!"

Morden watched, noting the impatience which seemed to grow from nowhere on the young woman's face. Without another word, the girl loosed her arrow into the leafy jungle tangle. Morden heard the shaft hit. It made a hollow thunking sound as if burying its head into hard, dense wood. He wondered momentarily why she had missed whatever it was she'd been shooting at, but his confusion was broken along with the silence of the surrounding jungle as a high-pitched shriek tore the air. The girl drew another arrow and nocked it. At the same instant, the jungle before her bulged outward, shedding its coat of brown and green and coming alive in a writhing, whipping mass of black.

"WHAT IN THE NINE HELLS?" Morden cursed, leaping from his crouch and nearly falling down the steep incline. Below, the girl fired her second arrow into the seething wall of ebon vines. The vines were thick, broader in diameter than Morden's chest and studded with wicked, razor-sharp thorns. The tendrils bulged up an out, reaching and questing for the source of their pain. The arrow pierced one of the thrashing members, bringing a gout of yellow sap. Shrieking again, the vines recoiled, pulling themselves back and coiling over one another in a protective weave.

"VISH-MUNN!" The girl cried, turning and running from the wall of tangling black growth. Morden whipped his head toward her, watching as she pointed with her fingers in a "V" toward her eyes then back toward the vines. "VISH-MUNN!"

Morden turned, following the girl's suggestion just as a low rumble reached his ears. The vines below had pulled back into themselves, pressing hard on the left and right, compacting themselves into separate, impenetrable walls. Between these curving, twitching surfaces, a wide corridor had been left empty, forming an open tunnel in the unnatural vegetation that let out onto the mossy ground of the clearing. The rumble quieted and the shrieking of the wounded vines was replaced by the howling din of savage animal growls. In seconds, the growls were followed by the creatures that uttered them and two monstrosities, twisted from nature and humankind into slavering engines of destruction, burst from the heart of the vine wall and hurtled after the girl.

The lead beast, a horrid combination of man and panther, thundered forward raising a feline shriek and a huge spiked club. Behind it, a demonic thing born of wild boar and twisted human flesh brandished a similar weapon, grunting and drooling from a dripping snout flanked by curved yellow tusks. Before them, the girl screamed and raced for the cluster of creeper vines. Her eyes were fear-stricken and her feet were a blur. At the

cliff's edge, Morden didn't hesitate. He leaped from the mossy top, groping and sliding down the steep incline until his boots sank into the mossy floor of the clearing. On level ground again, he rose and raced toward the panther thing, raising his axe in attack and his voice in a blood-curdling battle cry.

The creature hissed and spun, drawing back black lips and baring razored white fangs. The club in its right paw swung forward, wide and low, cruel spikes scoring the ground. Morden vaulted the strike, leaping over the flashing weapon and hurtling toward the unprotected belly of the beast. His axe flashed in a sweeping silver arc and the honed edge bit deep, splitting pelt and flesh in a smooth stroke. The panther beast roared in pain, crumpling to the soft earth and cradling the gaping rent in its abdomen with spasming claws as intestines and black blood spilled in a torrent.

Morden rolled, putting space between himself and the dying monstrosity. Finding his footing, he rose, shaking gore from the channel in his axe and wiping stinging sweat from his eyes as new thunder shook the ground. The boar creature was upon him, its club raised high in both gnarled hands, its sunken black eyes slanted in rage. There was no time to raise his axe or dodge and Morden closed his eyes, setting his teeth together against the shock of the inevitable deathblow.

It was for that reason that he could only hear, rather than see the twin arrows pierce both of the monster's eyes. The shafts entered beneath the boar-thing's brows and exited the back of its massive skull, showering gore and bone and destroying its brain. The great club dropped from instantly stiff fingers to fall behind the beast and the titanic form pitched forward, covering Morden in its final shadow before crushing him to the earth.

Two days later, Morden awoke to the gentle movement of a cool cloth on his brow. He opened his eyes and stared up into the lovely face and blue eyes of the girl who had saved his life twice over and raised a hand to grasp her wrist. She pulled back at first, startled at his awakening, then eased with a smile curling on her lips as she gently placed his hand back at his side. Morden eased back himself, moving his head around and taking in his surroundings. He lay on a wooden cot, cushioned by thick furs. Around his crude bed, the walls of a thatch hut stood from support poles driven deep into the ground. The hut was littered with cooking utensils, furs, stone weapons and implements and the makings of a fire pit. The only light came from the open doorway and a small, fat candle made from animal tallow that guttered and wavered beside the cot.

"I..." he stuttered weakly, raising his head a bit. "I AM CALLED MORDEN."

"DINNA-GAH," the girl answered, gently pushing his shoulders back to the cot. "PLEASE, I WANT TO THANK YOU. I WANT YOU TO HAVE MY NAME AT LEAST. I AM MORDEN," he said, repeatedly touching his fingers to his chest. His hand rose, taking a few strands of his hair between his fingers. "RED...MORDEN."

"MOR-DANN," the girl answered, smiling again. He returned her smile and eased back onto the furs as she raised a hand to her own chest. "LHIANNA. LHI-ANNA."

Morden was opening his mouth to speak again when a shadow filled the doorway. Lhianna started, rising quickly from the cot and carrying her wooden bowl and cloth to the other side of the hut. Morden turned to the door again as the shadow moved forward. He rose from the cot, swinging his legs over so that his feet rested on the ground. Looking up, his eyes narrowed in surprise as a hunched, stooped old man covered in furs entered the stuffy confines of the hut.

"HIS NAME WAS GARA," Ghurrd said, smoking thoughtfully. "HE WAS CHIEF AND HE HAD COME TO SEE THE MYSTERIOUS MAN FROM THE SEA. SEE HIM...AND TELL HIM A TALE."

"A TALE?" Finn exclaimed. "BUT HOW? MORDEN DIDN'T SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE!"

"NOT AT FIRST HE DIDN'T. BUT THE OLD MAN BENT CLOSE AND BLEW A DRAFT OF WHITE DUST INTO MORDEN'S EAR AND WHEN NEXT THE ISLANDER SPOKE, THE REAVER UNDERSTOOD."

"MANY YEAR AGO, BEFORE I AM LEADER OF MY PEOPLE AND AM JUST BOY, DARK MAN COME TO ISLAND HOME," Gara said, his voice a hoarse whisper emanating from his wrinkled brown face. He stood before Morden in the swelter of the little hut, bent and twisted with age, back misshapen by a malformed hump and covered from head to toe in heavy furs. He spoke in earnest, relating the tale quickly but seriously. "WE FIND HIM ON BEACH, STEPPING FROM LONG, BLACK BOAT WITH NO SAIL, NO PADDLE. ISLAND PEOPLE FRIGHTENED, COME FROM JUNGLE WITH SPEAR AND BOW, MAKE POINT AT SEA, TRY MAKE LEAVE. DARK MAN ONLY SMILE AND OPEN ROBE. DARK MAN PULL GLOWING BALL FROM ROBE. BALL HAVE VEINS, LIKE MAN-FLESH, LIKE SOMETHING ALIVE. VEINS TURN TO ROOTS AT BOTTOM OF BALL, LIKE SEED. FROM TOP OF BALL GROW BLACK FLOWER. DARK MAN PULL BACK HOOD, IS BALD. BALD HEAD COVERED IN DRAWINGS, SHOW MANY BLACK VINES AND DRAWINGS NOT STILL. DRAWINGS MOVE, CRAWL OVER DARK MAN'S HEAD. ISLAND PEOPLE BACK AWAY FROM DARK MAN, FEAR MAGICKS. DARK MAN LAUGH, CALL HIMSELF BY NAME, KA-SYTHUSS, SAY HE COME HERE TO STAY, BUILD POWER, SAY ISLAND PEOPLE SERVE. ISLAND PEOPLE SAY NO SERVE, SAY KILL DARK MAN. DARK MAN STOP LAUGHING."

"WAIT," Morden interrupted, attempting to rise. "THIS BLACK ROSE, IT MAKES MAGICK? MAGICK THAT...?"

"HSSST!" Lhianna spat loudly from across the hut. Morden raised his hands, palms out and sank back onto the cot as the old chief continued his tale.

"DARK MAN KA-SYTHUSS PULL PETAL FROM BLACK ROSE. ONE PETAL ONLY. ONE PETAL ENOUGH. HE TOSS PETAL TO SAND, COVER WITH FOOT, SAY STRANGE WORDS. ISLAND PEOPLE WATCH AND WAIT AND SOON, GROUND BEGIN TO SHAKE, SAND BEGIN TO SINK. PEOPLE MORE AFRAID, RUN FOR JUNGLE AND DARK MAN LAUGH. WE HEAR HELL IN THE AIR. ANIMAL SCREAM. DEVIL CRY...AND WE TURN...WE LOOK. MONSTER CRAWL FROM SANDS. DARK DEMON WITH HEAD OF OCTOPUS AND SPEARS...MONSTER COME FOR ISLAND PEOPLE, TRY KILL. DARK MAN CRY OUT AND MONSTER STOP. HE SPEAK MORE STRANGE WORDS, CAST SPELL. SANDS SHAKE AGAIN AND BLACK VINES CRAWL OUT. VINES SNARE MONSTER, STING WITH THORNS. MONSTER TRY RUN TO SEA, BUT VINES HOLD FAST AND THORN VENOM TURN DEMON TO IRON. MONSTER HELD BY DARK MAN MAGICKS. MANY YEAR. ISLAND PEOPLE MUCH AFRAID, FALL TO SAND, WORSHIP KA-SYTHUSS. DARK MAN SMILE AGAIN, GO INTO JUNGLE, DISAPPEAR. ISLAND PEOPLE NO SEE FOR MANY WEEK. NO SEE UNTIL FIRST NIGHT OF SONG."

"SONG?" Morden asked, looking up in confusion.

"THORN-SONG," Gara replied, frowning. "VINES MAKE SONG, RUB TOGETHER, MAKE SWEET MAGICK MUSIC. MUSIC LURE YOUNG MAN FROM VILLAGE, DRAW HIM TO THORN-WALL. FAMILY TRY STOP YOUNG MAN, YOUNG MAN FIGHT FAMILY, GO ANYWAY."

"WHY DO THE YOUNG MEN GO TO THE THORN WALL?" Morden asked, brows slanting.

"GO TO KA-SYTHUSS, FEED WITH BLOOD...FEED DARK SEED. ONCE BLOOD GONE, VINES TAKE FLESH AND BONE, MIX WITH ANIMAL FROM JUNGLE, MAKE MONSTERS. MONSTERS PROTECT VINES."

"THE BEAST-MEN..."

"NOT MUCH MAN ANYMORE," Gara frowned. "MUCH BEAST. I FIND OUT SOON WHEN CHIEF ASK YOUNG MEN LEFT IN VILLAGE GO TO THORN WALL AND KILL DARK MAN, STOP SONG. WE GO, WE FIGHT, MANY DIE. ALL DIE BUT ME, GARA. I COME BACK, WOUNDED AND SCARRED, COVERED IN FURS TO HIDE SHAME OF DARK MAN'S TOUCH. BEFORE I RUN, I SEE KA-SYTHUSS AT TOP OF THORN WALL. VERY THIN, VERY PALE. KA-SYTHUSS BODY DYING, NOT STRONG...DISEASED. HIS BODY GROWING WEAKER, SUCKED DRY BY HIS SICKNESS AND BY DARK SEED. SEED PART OF DARK MAN NOW. I SEE IT, SEE IT GROWING. DARK SEED GROWING

FROM KA-SYTHUSS CHEST, VEINS SUNK DEEP..LIKE ROOTS. SUCK LIFE FROM WIZARD, WIZARD NEED BLOOD, MUCH BLOOD OR BODY DIE AND SEED DIE."

"THE SEED CANNOT DIE!" Morden cried, leaping to his feet. Across the hut, Lhianna flinched. "I HAVE NEED OF THE IRON ROSE! IT IS WHY I AM HERE!"

"WHY YOU NEED IRON ROSE?" Gara asked, eyes hooded in shadow.

"MY WIFE...I AM TOLD IT WILL RETURN HER TO ME."

"IRON ROSE EVIL. BUT HAVE MUCH POWER. COULD DO THIS THING, GIVE NEW LIFE," Gara raised his eyes to meet Morden's. The light in them was dark, desperate. "YOU WANT IRON ROSE, YOU MUST KILL DARK MAN KA-SYTHUSS."

"YES," Morden answered, balling his fists and staring at the little hunched man.

"THIS IS GOOD," the aged chieftain breathed as he lowered his gaze and turned toward the door. "THEN YOU SLEEP THIS NIGHT AND LET WOUNDS HEAL. TOMORROW YOU SLAY THE DARK ONE AND TAKE IRON ROSE FROM HERE."

That night, Morden lay awake, listening to the animal sounds from the jungle outside and watching shadows dance on the walls of his hut. He repeated the details of the old chief's story in his mind, going over them again and again, trying to devise a plan by which to slay the dark wizard and his monstrous beasts and win the one thing in all of Agadah that might breathe life into his slain Brynna once more. His thoughts were interrupted as a shadow separated itself from the night and Lhianna passed quietly through the door of the hut.

"MOR-DANN?"

"LHIANNA," Morden whispered, rising to his elbows on the cot. "WHAT IS IT? IS SOMETHING WRONG?"

The girl didn't speak. She moved quickly to the cot and sat on its edge. Her hands went immediately to Morden's chest and slid upward, curling over his shoulders. He stared up into her shadowed face, frozen by its beauty as it flickered and swayed in the light of the squat candle. Breathing heavily, Lhianna leaned forward and pressed her lips to his.

"LHIANNA...NO," Morden said, shaking with desire and bringing his hands up to squeeze her arms to her sides as he lifted her up and away from him. "I CANNOT. GODS HELP ME. IT IS MY DESIRE, BUT I AM TRUE TO..."

"YOUR WIFE...DEAD," Lhianna whispered, shaking his grip from her arms. She rose fully in the candlelight, reaching behind her neck and pulling free the thong that held the furs covering her chest. The furs fell away and her bare flesh gleamed in the half-light. "MAYBE IRON ROSE GIVE HER BACK TO YOU, BUT THIS NIGHT..."

With that, Lhianna leaned over Morden and doused the candle with a soft breath, throwing the hut into darkness. She moved to her right and lowered her head, covering his lips with hers again and for a time, neither of them spoke.

Lhianna sat bolt upright on the cot, shedding furs and staring at the doorway with eyes bulging in horror. All around her, the night was filled with the high-pitched wail of thorn-song. Her hand shot out, seeking the reassurance of Morden's warm flesh beside her and her heart hitched in her chest as her fingers closed on empty furs.

"MOR-DANN," she whispered, leaping from the bed and groping in darkness for her clothes, knife and bow before racing out the door into the screaming night.

At the mouth of Gara's cave above the village, Lhianna paused only briefly at the sight of the prone warrior lying next to a dead fire pit and a spilled bowl of drugged berry wine. Her panic building, she raced forward and entered the cave. The cavern was small, decorated with feathers, paint and bones...and it was empty. Again, she wasted little time on Gara's whereabouts as she spotted a hanging fur pulled aside at the back of the cave.

When she spotted the tunnel behind it and heard the loud trill of the thorn-song piping from the darkness, she lowered her head and ducked inside.

The cramped tunnel was narrow and winding. Its low ceiling hung with dangling roots that showered Lhianna with soil as she passed under them in a semi-crouch. She moved in darkness, feeling her way along damp earthen walls and breathing deeply to stave off the terrors of traveling blind. On she went, unfaltering, clutching her bow to her side and following the growing volume of thorn-wail. At last, sparse illumination lit the tunnels' floor ahead and she ran, spurred on by the promise of moonlight.

The tunnel ended on a narrow spit of rock that rimmed the wall of a shallow valley. The ledge led downward, slanting and narrow, to disappear into a coiling, sliding sea of singing vines that hid the valley floor below. The vines looped and thrashed, rubbing at each other to produce their ghostly tune and raising black leaves toward the massive slab of black briars that formed the thorn wall. Lhianna scanned the moving surface, realizing that for the first time, she was behind the barrier. Sudden, shrill laughter from above caused her to start and fall back against the cliff wall. She raised her head and barely managed to choke back the scream that rose in her throat at the sight atop the dark pile.

Silhouetted against the silver disc of the moon, old Gara stood with head slumped forward and spindly arms raised. His robes of thick fur lay at his feet and he stood naked save for a loincloth, pale skin shining blue-white in the lunar glow. Lhianna stared, her terror giving way to curiosity as she saw Gara's long-covered flesh for the first time. His entire body was a patchwork of scars. The old wounds stood out in bright pink lines against the ivory of the smoother skin. The scars were small and narrow, like bite marks from a thousand fangs...or a thousand thorns. Lhianna's head shook from side to side as she looked closer, watching as the old chief's skin rose and fell. Something seemed to move, to travel beneath the flesh...something long, tubular and whip-like.

"VINES..." Lhianna whispered under her breath. Her gaze followed the fleshy movement up the chief's legs, then up his spine to the malformed hump that rode between his shoulders. There, the greatest horror waited, mired in torn, seeping flesh, anchored by tight red veins that punctured the skin in a dozen places. On the old man's back, the pulsing crimson seed and the stem of its single black flower rose to bask in the light of the gibbous moon. And above the bloom of the Iron Rose, an impossible, muscled stalk of flesh and bone supported a grinning, laughing head straight out of nightmare. "THE DARK MAN!"

"COILS OF DARKNESS," the leering, bald head cackled, bulging its milky eyes and flashing decaying gray teeth. The twisted, unnatural head of the wizard Ka-Sythuss writhed atop its swaying neck, spitting its words toward the front of the thorn wall. Beneath his withered chin, the real head of Gara, chief of the island people, lay slumped, eyes tightly closed as if in a stupor.

"BRING HIM UNTO ME!"

Lhianna fought back a second scream as thick black coils rose before the dark man, carrying a human form into the moonlight. They waved and lashed, seeking the praise of their master as they brought him their prize. Amidst their leaves, unconscious and limp, held fast by the supernatural might of the vines and the drone of their song, hung Red Morden. The winged helm shone in the sparse illumination and his notched axe hung from its leather strap at his right wrist.

"AH, MY CHILDREN. WE HAVE DONE WELL THIS NIGHT," the dark man laughed. In seeming response, the dark vines brought Morden's dangling body closer, until his exposed throat lay inches from twin rows of jagged, rotting teeth.

"THIS BODY IS STRONG, VITAL! TOO LONG HAS KA-SYTHUSS SUFFERED IN FEEBLE BONDAGE TO GARA'S CRIPPLED, WITHERED FORM! NOW, BLOOD-BEARD...WITH YOUR STRENGTH OF ARM AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE SEAS, I WILL AT LAST ESCAPE THIS ACCURSED ISLE AND THIS STUNTED FRAME! THEY HAVE SERVED THEIR PURPOSE, SHELTERING ME AND MY STOLEN PRIZE FROM THE CULT'S VENGEANCE, ALLOWING ME TO GROW IN POWER AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE GIFTS OF THE IRON ROSE! NOW, LET THOSE FOOLS TREMBLE! AYE, LET EVEN THE WHOLE OF AGADAH QUAKE AT THE COMING OF ITS NEW MASTER!"

"NO!" Lhianna screamed, firing her bow. The shaft flew straight and true, leaving the panther-gut string with a sharp twang. Its length slashed the moonlit night for a split second before sinking to its feathers into the dark man's left eye, showering yellow gore and wringing an agonized cry from his throat.

At the first octaves of their master's cry, the vines ceased their song. As if some mental link had been shattered, the undulating vines stopped their mutual caress, falling limp and lifeless into coiled heaps, returning to the natural state of the vegetation they were. Above Ka-Sythuss, the tendrils holding Red Morden relaxed their grip as well, dropping the Reaver atop the thorn wall. Instantly, with consciousness and vitality returning, he rose, bringing his left hand to his face to rub at his hammering forehead and gripping the haft of his axe with his right.

"NYROR'S BLOOD," MORDEN GROANED. "WHERE...?"

"WITCH!" The dark man's head shrieked, spinning in place and stretching his veined neck toward the ledge and Lhianna. Popping, stretching sounds accompanied the movement and the fleshy stalk that supported the wizard's bobbing skull began to extend toward the speechless girl. Seeing the leering, dripping head hurtling toward her, Lhianna fumbled for the quiver, desperately attempting to draw a second shaft. "THE VIKAVIAN'S FLESH IS MINE! YOU AND YOUR BOTHERSOME NEEDLE HAVE ONLY AWAKENED MY WRATH! NOW, YOUR FLESH, YOUR BROKEN BONES...WILL FEED MY THORNS FOR THE LAST TIME!"

The wizard's head streaked toward Lhianna, batting her bow aside with its crown and pushing past her rising hand to lock blackened teeth onto her throat. The girl screamed in horror and pain, using her hands like claws to tear at the pulsing neck of the biting thing as it bored into her neck and shoulder.

On the thorn wall, Morden's eyes flew open wide, the sound of Lhianna's cry bright and chilling in his ears. His eyes flashed to the ledge, watching the hideous scene with confusion, his mind spinning as it tried to comprehend the situation it had woken to. A sudden sound at his feet interrupted his voyeur's gaze and he snapped his eyes earthward. Before him, a pair of long, dark paws topped the edge of the thorn-wall. Behind them, a hideous drooling head followed. As Morden stared, staggering backwards a step, a beast more jungle ape than man, with huge curved tusks and a single, spiraling horn extending from its forehead, rose from the tangle below.

The sudden clash of steel and the shrieking of one of his own in mortal pain snapped old Gara out of his supernatural sleep. He raised his groggy head slowly, lifting his chin from his chest and peering through bleary eyes into the half-light. Pain wracked his frame; pain from some unseen wound and agony from the stretching, pulling sensation in his back. He moaned, deep and miserable in his throat and twisted his head as far to the right as he could manage. He couldn't see much, only the moving shadows of something long and swaying. A second shadow to his left brought the old man's head around. The shadow fell on the mass of thorn-vines coiled at his feet and grew in size and density, as if something or someone had stepped up next to him. He moved his head further, a thin smile curling his lips as he recognized the shadow's owner.

"THANK THE GODS," he croaked, keeping the smile as he spoke his final words. "KILL ME."

Red Morden looked down on the twisted form of the old chief without a shred of compassion. Lost in the red rage of battle and assailed by the screams from the ledge behind him, the Reaver stood blood-spattered and trembling, gripping his stained axe in his right hand. From the fisted left hung the severed head of the horned ape thing. Its sunken, dead eyes reflected pinpoints of moonlight and its spiral horn gleamed menacingly. Morden kept his stare fixed on the old man as he dropped his axe, letting it dangle from its loop at his wrist and bringing his right hand over to clutch at the ape skull. With the head held firmly between his palms, he lifted it high over his own.

"YOU KEPT YOUR DARK SECRETS WELL, OLD MAN. AND THEY HAVE DAMNED YOU!" Morden roared as he plunged the ape-head forward, ramming the two-foot spiral horn through Gara's chest.

In that instant, as the twisted lance pierced the old chief's heart, the world roared. The thick sea of vines atop the wall and across the narrow valley floor came alive in a flailing, riotous frenzy. They assailed the air, slashing and whipping madly, lashing out in mindless, tortured confusion. Morden was forced to duck, falling into an unsteady crouch on the shifting surface atop the wall, dodging and batting at the crazed tendrils to maintain his perch. On the rock ledge, the dark man's teeth came away from Lhianna's throat, spraying blood. A deeper, more tortured scream rode his thin lips and his remaining eye bulged in anger and pain. Lhianna, released from the burrowing onslaught of the wizard's mouth, fell back against the rocks, clutching her wounds and sliding toward the ground. Above her, Ka-Sythuss gnashed his teeth and curled his head back toward Morden. Vile curses spoken in long dead, arcane languages spilled from his mouth as the long, veined neck struck forward like an adder, carrying the vengeful, clacking skull back to the thorn wall.

Morden ducked a thick, razored trunk as in bent and sheared past him. The curved thorns missed him by mere inches and yellow venom sizzled on the brass surface of his winged helm as they passed. Rising, he turned toward the rising cries of rage. The sorcerous head came screeching through the thrashing curtain of vines and Morden stood his ground. At the last second, when the frothing spittle from the wizard's gaping, cursing mouth sprayed his chest, Morden threw himself to the left, swinging out and down with his axe at the same instant. He felt the honed edge slice flesh, felt it pass through thicker, corded muscle and swing free as it severed the neck stalk to cleave empty air.

Morden landed and rolled, coming back to his feet quickly and spinning to face the dark man. His eyes fixed on the flopping, spraying neck stalk and the twitching head that lay at his feet in a thick, yellow puddle. He lowered his axe and stepped forward, watching the thing's mouth work in silent, breathless rage as it squirmed in its death throes. All around, the vines fell to earth, stiffening and crackling dryly, chafing and shedding bits of themselves as the dark magick that kept them alive began to fade. Morden stepped forward, glancing for a second into the wizard's lifeless eye, then, convinced that Ka-Sythuss would see no more, drew back a foot and kicked the bald, tattooed skull into the mass of dead vegetation below.

He turned and walked swiftly to Gara's crumpled form. Kneeling, he cupped his hand and gently cradled the bloom of the Iron Rose as he brought his axe up and severed the thorned stem with the other. Rising, he looked at the flower momentarily, running a calloused finger over its velvet black petals before tucking it into his tunic. Looking down again, he watched the pulsing

seed locked onto the dead man's back. It swelled and deflated, the veins that held it fast writhing and pulling, sucking for the last bit of sustenance in the old chief's body. Disgusted, Morden spat on the seed and raised a booted foot above it. With a grunt, he brought the boot down, smashing the swollen thing into a red and yellow pulp.

Moments later, Morden cradled Lhianna's limp frame in his arms. He stared down into her pale, bloodless face and frowned, brushing strands of dark hair from her eyes and stroking her cheek gently with a thumb. Lhianna coughed, shaking and clutching at him with her left hand. The touch of her fingers was cold on his skin and his frown deepened as she spoke in a wet, gurgling whisper.

"MOR-DANN...YOU LIVE."

"YES," he replied, stiffening as uncustomary tears formed at the edge of his eyes. "I LIVE...THANKS TO YOU AND YOUR BOW."

"IT WAS...GOOD SHOT?" She asked, eyes fluttering as she attempted to meet his gaze.

"BETTER THAN ANY I'VE MADE," Morden replied, shaking a bit himself now.

"LHIANNA...YOU..."

"NO." Lhianna whispered, raising her hand to his beard and clutching several of the fiery strands between her fingers. "I HAVE TOLD YOU...IRON ROSE...EVIL. FLEASE..."

"BUT..." Morden stammered, helpless in her stare.

"KISS ME, MOR-DANN," Lhianna wheezed, her eyes closing.

"YES," he managed, leaning over and touching his lips to hers. He recoiled a bit at their chill and winced at the warm rivers that slid down his cheeks.

"MY...RED MOR-DANN..." Lhianna managed as her eyes closed fully and a final, whistling breath passed between her lips. Her hand fell from Morden's beard and she was gone.

—+—

Moments later, at the mouth of Gara's cave, Morden rushed into the rising dawn and stared down at a scene of chaos below. The villagers were scurrying about, grabbing up weapons and shields, shouting and pointing and making their way into the jungle. He rushed down the slope and raced toward the thinning crowd. Grabbing the first person he reached, he spun the young islander, shouting into the man's face and narrowing his brows in confusion.

"YOU! WHAT IS THIS? THE DARK MAN IS DEAD! I HAVE KILLED HIM AND..."

"NOT DARK MAN! SHIP! SHIP ON BEACH! MANY SOLDIER!"

—+—

Jallak watched, staring along the beach toward the monstrous iron statue where Chunn and the dark wizard stood pointing into the jungle. He watched the sailors from the K'Thayan vessel as they milled about, waiting for orders or leaning on spears. He turned his head, taking in the wearied frames of his own men, seated in the sand around him, bound together by thick cords of rope. The K'Thayans had replaced their chains with the heavy rope before loading them into longboats bound for shore. Jallak smiled to himself, thanking Nyror and all the sea gods and reminding himself that despite everything that had befallen them, the sea-raiders could always count on their enemies to be fools.

He forced himself to wipe the smile from his face as he turned to watch the captain and his sorcerer again, content with smiling on the inside as he worked the sharp shard of broken shell over and over against his bonds.

—+—

The clangor of steel reached Morden's ears long before he and the screeching mob of islanders burst from the jungle to actually see the desperate battle on the beach. His own war cry burst from his lips as his eyes found Jallak amid a tight cluster of blonde and black-haired Vikavlans who slashed and stabbed at a knot of shorter foes near the shore. His lips curled into a savage smile and his teeth gleamed from his beard as the scent of sweat and blood filled his nostrils.

"DO SOMETHING!" Chunn screamed, clutching Ka-Varyss's robes with his meaty, sweat-soaked hand and turning to plead into the wizard's face.

"THEY'RE CUTTING US TO SHREDS!"

"DO?" The wizard responded lazily. His face showed no emotion save the slightest hint of amusement. "WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE ME DO, CAPTAIN?"

"CAST ONE OF YOUR DAMNABLE SPELLS OR SOMETHING! YOU'RE A WIZARD AREN'T YOU?"

"MY POWERS ARE LIMITED, CAPTAIN. EVEN IN THE PRESENCE OF THE DREAD FLOWER, I CAN ONLY DO SO MUCH," he responded, turning his slitted eyes toward the plump, panicked man.

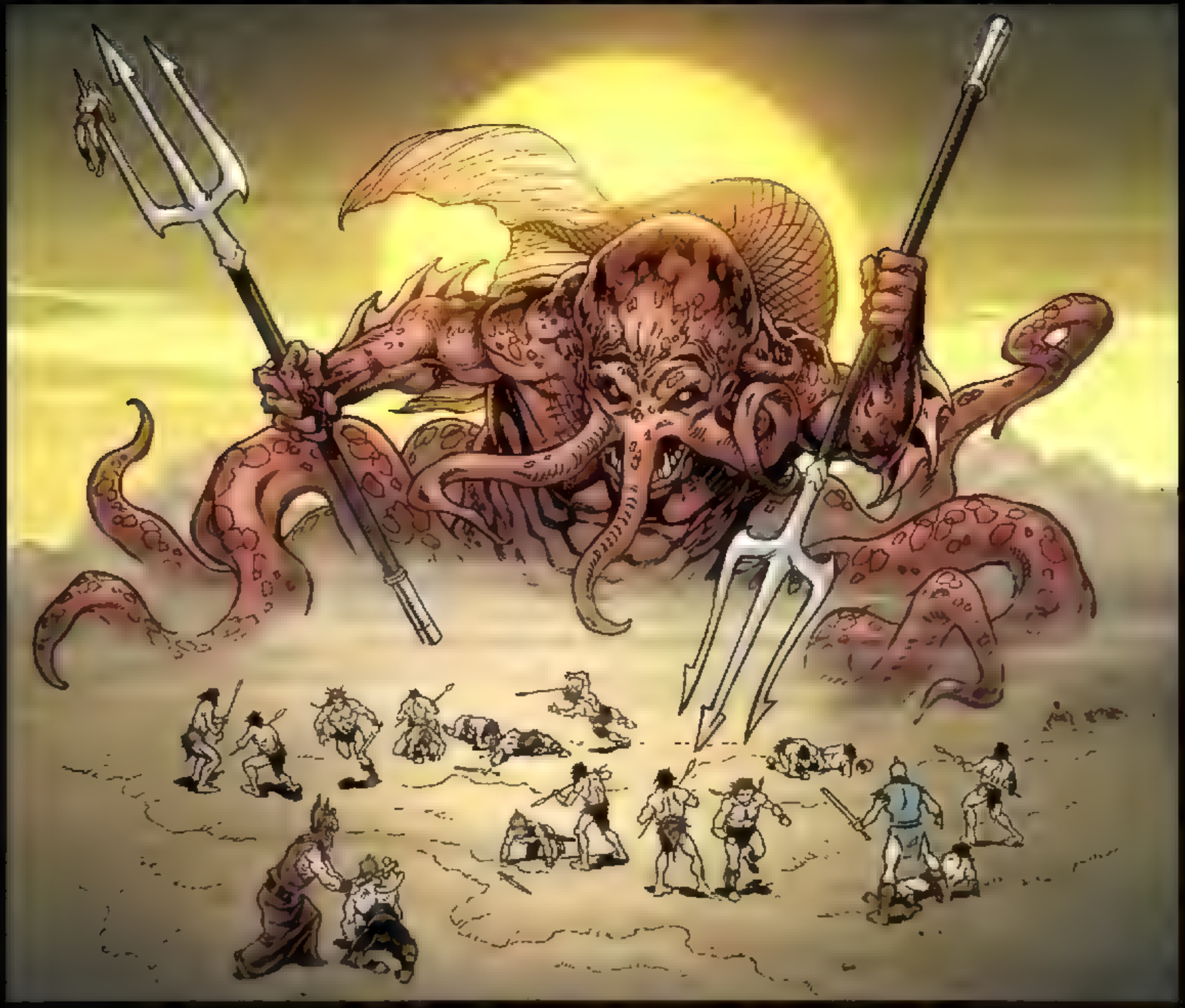
"WELL DO WHAT YOU CAN, DAMN YOU! RED MORDEN HAS JOINED THE FRAY AND IF HE HAS YOUR CURSED ROSE AS YOU'VE SAID, YOU'LL HAVE TO PLUCK IT FROM HIS DEAD FINGERS!"

"PERHAPS THERE IS A WAY," the wizard grinned, raising his head for a moment to stare up at the iron merman above them. "BUT THERE WILL BE A PRICE."

"TO HELL WITH THE PRICE! NAME IT! JUST DO WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO!"

"VERY WELL." Ka-Varyss smiled, pulling a short dagger from his sleeve and raking it across Chunn's throat in a single, blindingly fast stroke.

Morden had just managed to battle his way to Jallak's side, flashing a bloody smile at his boyhood friend, when a hellish roar drowned the sounds of battle. As a single entity, the combatants, Vikavian, islander and K'Thayan alike paused in mid-stroke, conflict forgotten as they turned their heads toward the sound. Icy horror passed through the throng like a wave at the sight of the massive, tentacled horror charging toward them.



Jallak threw himself to the ground, narrowly avoiding the outside tine of the trident as it slashed past. The bodies of two ***KThayans*** hung lifeless from the weapon's other barbs, their dead flesh dangling wetly from the impaling iron spikes. Morden leapt right, avoiding a shared fate with one of the dripping corpses and bringing his axe down on the monster's wrist. Black blood flew, spraying the fire-haired Reaver as a hideous bellow of enraged pain ripped the air. The monstrous webbed claw spread its taloned fingers and the discarded trident buried its head in the beach as Morden spun clear, raising his weapon for a second blow. Above him, the demonic merman shrieked and turned, its facial tentacles a swarm of undulating, suckered movement. The living statue pulled its hand back and up, avoiding the fall of Morden's axe before sweeping downward again and wrapping iron-strong fingers about the berserker's waist. Morden cried out, trying in vain to hack at the imprisoning fingers. The digits were too close and he couldn't get leverage with the wide blade. The hand squeezed and Morden felt his ribs threaten to buckle as he was pulled, breathless and battered, into the air.

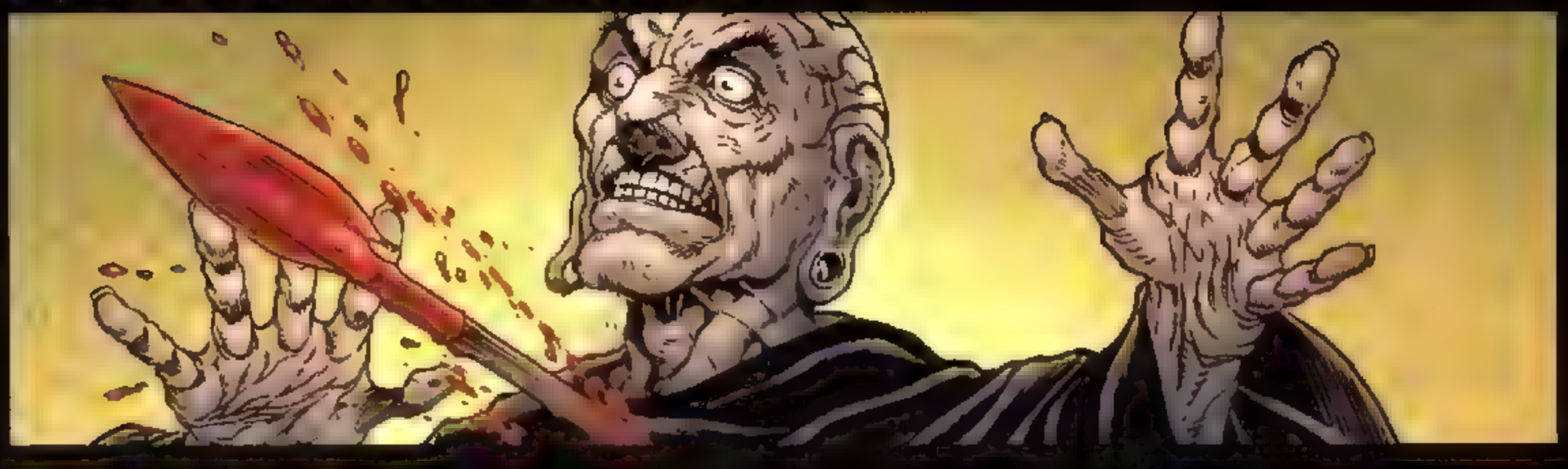
"MORDEN!" Jallak screamed, watching helplessly as Morden's kicking boots passed over his head. He hurled his spear, cursing as its blade bounced harmlessly from the thick, rubbery flesh of the creature's arm. "DAMN!"

Jallak cast about madly, searching the corpse-littered ground for a fresh weapon. As he searched, his gaze traveled up the beach, chancing upon the spot where the statue had stood frozen. He paused, squinting against the sun's glare, narrowing his gaze as he fixed it on the kneeling form of the black robed wizard. The thin man was on his knees next to Chunn's staring corpse; hands buried to the forearms in the sand, his head thrown back, mouth chanting madly. Jallak stared a moment longer, then whipped his head around to watch as Morden batted and slashed at the writhing tentacles ringing the monstrous beak above. When he turned back toward the distant, chanting wizard, he understood.

"A SPEAR, DAMN YOUR SOULS," he shouted. "SOMEONE FIND ME ANOTHER SPEAR!"

In the air, Morden shouted, cursed and hacked at the face of the hellish demon. He kicked with his legs as best he could, desperate to avoid the razor sharp, hungry beak. As he slashed a dripping tentacle in two scant inches from his face, he began to feel the strength in his axe arm begin to ebb.

It was a lucky throw. It was also the best throw Jallak had ever made at any similar distance and he thanked gods both believed in and dismissed as his lance found its mark. The spearhead drilled through Ka-Varyss's chest, transfixing the sorcerer and shattering his spine. Lifeless before his back hit the ground, the cultist's hands pulled free of the sand and he flopped, stiffening and silent onto the hot beach.



The monster's grip eased around his torso and Morden paused, lowering his axe and sucking air gratefully just as dozens of titanic, thorned vines burst from the sand all around. The vines whipped about the huge beast, snaring its limbs and coiling about its body. Morden glanced down at the fingers that held him, raising his brows in confusion as the supple, scaled flesh began to harden and crack. The beast wailed, fighting the grip of the confining, stinging vines and replacing the rage in its voice with fear. Morden turned his gaze earthward, spotting Jallak and shouting his name as he stretched an arm helplessly toward impossible rescue.

Jallak's shouting face was the last thing he saw before the powerful vines pulled him, along with the fast-hardening statue and the legendary Iron Rose, beneath the sand.

"NO," Jallak whispered as he ran to the spot where Morden and the creature had disappeared. He dropped to his knees on the beach amid the swirling sand that was already filling the vast hole created by their passing. The sands left no sign, no path by which he might follow. Jallak stabbed both hands into the hot maelstrom, digging and clawing and repeating his mantra.

"NO-NO-NO-NO-N..."

He stopped, words caught on his lips as he felt something among the grains. He fumbled, clutching at the yielding objects and raising them before him. He opened his fingers, staring in amazement at what he clutched. There, in his calloused palm, lay two velvety rose petals, both of them as black as the abyss.

"YOU, BRAGGEN!" Jallak shouted, standing and grabbing at the first Vikavian he saw.

"JALLAK! WE HAVE THEM! THE BEAST IS GONE AND THE K'THAYANS HAVE SURRENDERED! THE DAY IS OURS!"

"BIND THEM THEN," Jallak replied, tucking the black rose petals gently into his tunic. "AND LOAD THESE JUNGLE FOLK INTO THE LONGBOATS AS WELL! WE'LL NEED WHAT FEW MEN THEY HAVE TO TAKE THAT K'THAYAN TUB AND WE'LL NEED THEIR WOMEN TO REVIVE OUR CLAN! WE'RE GOING HOME!"

"AND WHAT OF RED MORDEN!?" Finn nearly bawled.

"YES, WHAT OF HIM?" Ghurrd hissed with a wicked, fire-lit grin. "FOR THAT, WE'LL HAVE TO TURN TO OLD VEDDRA HERE."

"EASE CLOSER TO THE FIRE THEN, BOY," Veddra croaked, lowering her hood and revealing gleaming eyes under a shock of white hair. "THINGS GET DARKER FROM HERE."

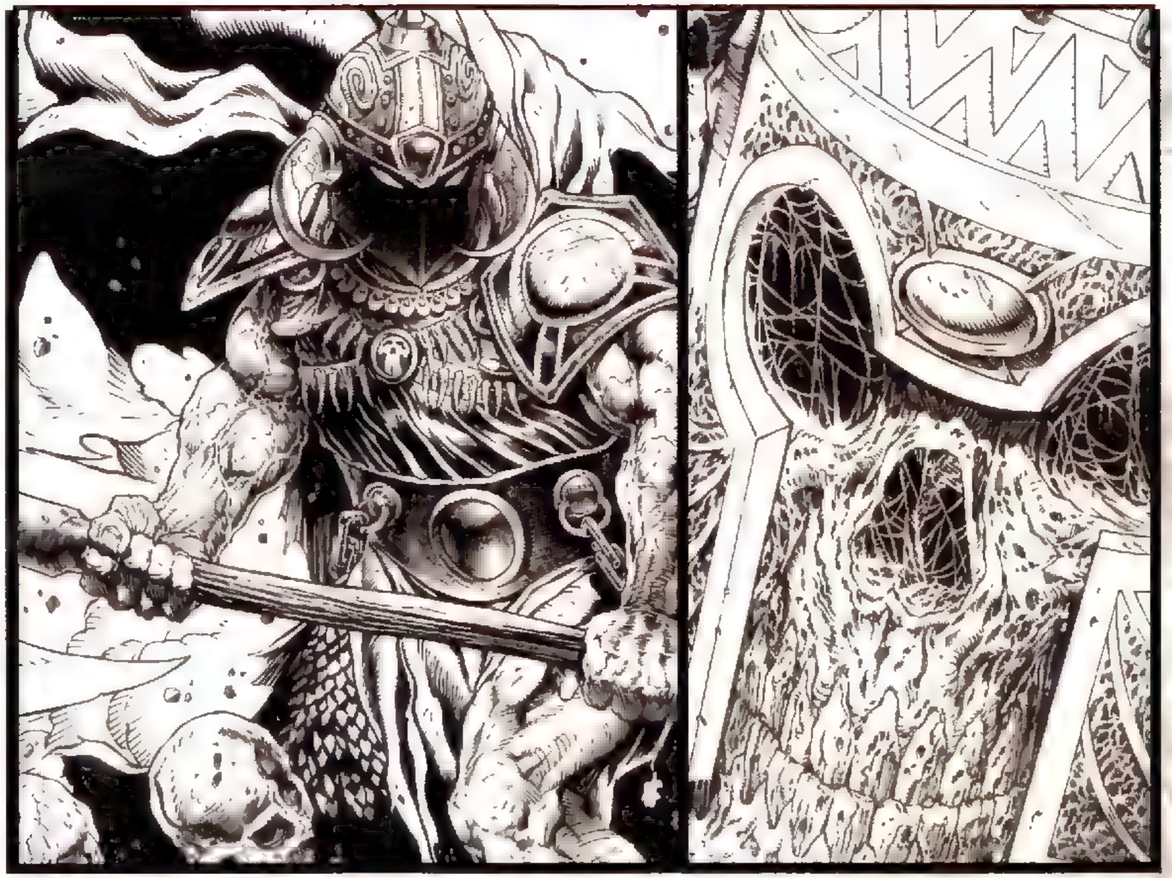
NEXT ISSUE

FRAZETTA'S DARK KINGDOM PART 4

WITH THE DIN OF BATTLE STILL RINGING IN HIS EARS, RED MORDEN PLUNGES INTO THE DARKNESS OF A SCREAMING VOID, ASSAILED BY VISIONS OF HORRORS PAST AND TERROR YET TO COME. AS THE LIGHT OF THE LIVING WORLD FADES, SO TOO DOES HIS GRASP ON THE IRON ROSE. WITH THE QUEST TO RAISE HIS BELOVED BRYNNA FROM THE DEAD FADING BEFORE HIM, HE CLOSES HIS EYES FOR THE FINAL TIME. WHEN NEXT THEY OPEN, MORDEN WILL SEE THE GRIM, SKULL-FACE OF THE BOATMAN THAT SLOWLY PROPELS HIM ACROSS A CRIMSON SEA TOWARD A FORBIDDING PILE OF DESOLATE STONE RULED BY THE SOULS OF THE WARRIOR DEAD.

ON THIS ISLE OF ROCK AND BONE, VIKAVIA'S RED REAVER WILL FACE HIS GREATEST CHALLENGE IN THE FORM OF AN UNSTOPPABLE ENGINE OF SLAUGHTER WITH GLOWING RED EYES.

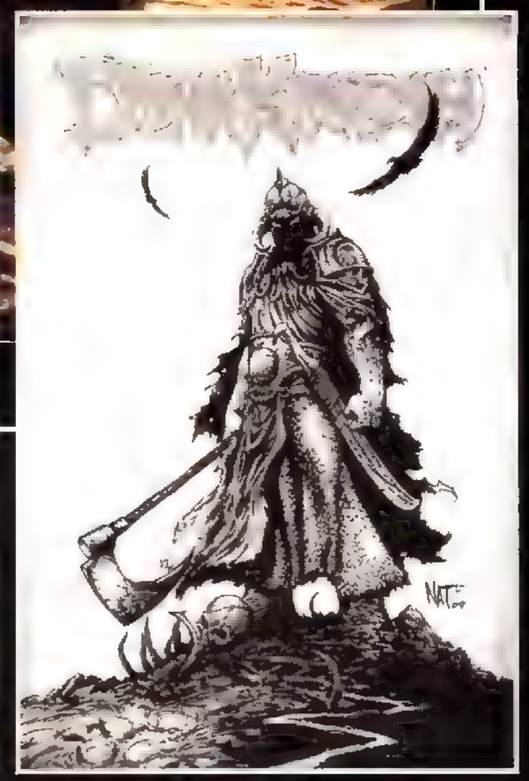
FRAZETTA COMICS' DEATH DEALER ENTERS THE DARK KINGDOM AS THE TITANIC SAGA CONCLUDES, RETURNING TO COMIC-STYLE, PANEL-TO-PANEL STORYTELLING SCRIPTED BY MARK KIDWELL AND MASTERFULLY ILLUSTRATED BY TIM VIGIL AND JAY FOTOS!



PREVIEW ART BY TIM VIGIL

COVER A FRANK FRAZETTA

COVER B TIM VIGIL



COVER C NAT JONES

PIN UP ART
MARK KIDWELL

THE FANTASTIC WORLDS OF FRAZETTA™

Copyright © Frank Frazetta, All Rights Reserved.

THE FANTASTIC WORLDS OF FRAZETTA VOL2 AVAILABLE NOW

This deluxe oversized hardcover (8.5" x 12") collects four classic Frazetta-inspired tales! Enter a distant world in **MOON MAID**, as a sheltered young woman finds herself torn between good, evil, and her destiny. Take a trip to the past in **NEANDERTHAL**, a tale of prehistoric life fraught with danger at every turn, while **FREEDOM** is a classic western set in Deadwood three months after the murder of Wild Bill Hickock! Return to the Land of Iparsia in **SORCERER**, an essential story of the Frazetta-verse set 900 years before the epic "Shadows of Mirahan" storyline from **Frank Frazetta's Death Dealer**. Featuring the industry's top creators, along with new, never-before-seen bonus material!
Full Color, 176 pages, $29.99

SOFT COVER NOW AVAILABLE

THE FANTASTIC WORLDS OF FRAZETTA

THE FANTASTIC WORLDS OF FRAZETTA VOL 1 NOW AVAILABLE

THIS OVERSIZED (8.5"X12"), LIMITED-EDITION HARDCOVER COLLECTS FOUR FANTASTIC TALES BASED ON THE PAINTINGS OF THE LEGENDARY FRANK FRAZETTA. ENTER A SAVAGE WORLD OF ADVENTURE IN **DARK KINGDOM**, AS RED MORDEN CONQUERS DEMONS AND MONSTERS TO AVENGE HIS FAMILY. IN **CREATURES**, AMERICAN ICON TEDDY ROOSEVELT PROTECTS HIS COUNTRY AND THE FREE WORLD BY WAGING A COVERT BATTLE AGAINST MARTIANS AND MAYAN GODS. RETURN TO THE LAND OF IPARSIA IN **SWAMP DEMON**, AN EPIC TALE SET 500 YEARS BEFORE **FRANK FRAZETTA'S DEATH DEALER**. TWO MONSTERS OF CLASSIC HORROR SQUARE OFF FOR A NO-HOLDS-BARRED BATTLE IN **DRACULA MEETS THE WOLFMAN**! FEATURING THE INDUSTRY'S TOP CREATORS, ALONG WITH NEW, NEVER-BEFORE-SEEN BONUS MATERIAL. THIS BOOK IS NOT TO BE MISSED! 176 PAGES, FULL COLOR $29.99.

RUNES OF RAGNAN

COLLECTED

DELVE INTO AN EPIC WORLD OF VIKING MYTHOLOGY SPANNING MORE THAN 1,000 YEARS. WARRIOR KINGS TOUCH THE FACE OF ODIN, AN ANCIENT DRUID ORDER PULLS THE PUPPET STRINGS OF PERCEPTION, A FIRE GIANT IS UNLEASHED FROM THE DEPTHS OF MUSPELL, TWO IMMORTAL BROTHERS FUEL MANKIND'S WARRING SPIRIT ACROSS COUNTLESS CENTURIES, AND AT THE CENTER ONE WOMAN BATTLES TO MAINTAIN A FRAGILE BALANCE. STEP INTO A REALITY STITCHED OF NORDIC LORE...JOIN THE HUNT FOR THE RUNES OF RAGNAN. WRITTEN BY TY GORTON AND ILLUSTRATED BY CULT FAVORITE ARTISTS, JOSH MEDORS(FRAZETTA'S SWAMP DEMON) AND JAY FOTOS(FRAZETTA'S DEATH DEALER). 136 PAGES. FULL COLOR. $14.99.

AVAILABLE NOW

FRANK FRAZETTA'S

DARK KINGDOM™

IMAGECOMICS.COM

00311

7 09853 00570 4